

PENNSYLVANIA TURNPIKE, MIDWAY PLAZA
N and S sides of TR 479,
approx. 1.5 miles E of Bedford Interchange
Bedford vicinity
Bedford County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-347

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

PENNSYLVANIA TURNPIKE, MIDWAY PLAZA

HAER No. PA-347

Location: N and S side of TR 479, about 1.5 miles
E of Bedford Interchange
Bedford (vic.)
Bedford County
Pennsylvania

Date of Construction: 1938-40

Present Owner: Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission

Present Use: Service Station, Rest Rooms, Restaurant,
Picnic Area, Parking Lot

Significance: One of ten service plazas built during
the construction of the Pennsylvania
Turnpike, Midway Plaza, just east of the
Bedford Interchange, was promoted as a
showplace of the turnpike. It was much
larger than the other nine plazas and
offered the most extensive range of
services including full-course meals
served, as the Turnpike trumpeted, "in
the colonial dining room" or on the
flagstone terrace amidst scenery that
"surpasses many of America's famous
mountain resorts."

Historian: Kim E. Wallace, 1994

Project Information: The results of the study of Bedford
County were published in 1994: Kim E.
Wallace (ed), Bedford County and Fulton
County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of
Historic Engineering and Industrial
Sites (Washington, D.C.: National Park
Service). The contents of the
publication were transmitted to the
Library of Congress as individual
reports. Research notes, field photos
and copies of historic photos collected
during the project were transmitted to
the AIHP Collection, Special
Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana
University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA
15705.

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The main Midway Plaza building on the south side of the turnpike consists of a central, two-story, five-bay section flanked by two large wings, each with a stone-end chimney. To the east is the smaller one-story stone service station building. This building appears to be used for storage and has been replaced by a modern gas station/convenience store building on its east side. The Midway Plaza building on the north side of the turnpike is a large one-story stone structure. A modern gas station and pumps are located at the west side of the westbound plaza.

In 1935 the Pennsylvania legislature authorized a feasibility study for using the roadbed of the South Penn Railroad to build a highway across the mountains of south-central and western Pennsylvania. The idea was developed by state planners with the expectation of receiving financing through federal New Deal public works programs. Final federal support for the project was secured October 10, 1938 and construction began October 27.

The new road would be distinctive for a number of reasons. It would be a toll road that planners claimed would eventually pay for the cost of its construction and maintenance. It was promoted as an "all-weather" highway because tunnels and a uniform road surface would lessen weather-related driving hazards. The turnpike would have standard design elements across its entire length of 160 miles and it would be a "limited access" highway, meaning access on and off the highway would be limited to a number of interchanges and any other grade crossings of local roads or railroads routed under or over the turnpike so that traffic flow was not interrupted. Limiting access, eliminating grade crossings, and design features such as banked curves and low grades of ascent were all intended to make high-speed, cross-country automobile travel safe and efficient. The Pennsylvania Turnpike was the first such "superhighway" in the United States. Its only precedent were the German autobahns built in the mid 1930s.

Construction was completed within two years and the turnpike opened October 1, 1940. The turnpike extended from Irwin, just east of Pittsburgh, to Carlisle, just west of Harrisburg. Driving between the two points on the turnpike took one-half to almost two-thirds less time than it did on U.S. 30, Lincoln Highway, or U.S. 22, the William Penn Highway. There were eleven interchanges along the turnpike where motorists exited or entered the turnpike through tollbooths originally called ticket offices. Interchanges were located to give access to major roads along the turnpike's route.

Ten service plazas with gas stations, rest rooms, and restaurants were an integral part of the limited access design providing essential services for a self-sufficient highway. Nine of the plazas, including Cove Valley, were one-story stone buildings

with restaurant counter service, rest rooms, and service station facilities. The plaza located at about the midpoint of the turnpike, Midway Plaza just east of the Bedford Interchange, was promoted as the welcoming showplace of the turnpike. It was much larger than the other plazas and offered the most extensive range of services including full-course meals "served in the colonial dining room" or on the flagstone terrace amidst scenery that "surpasses many of America's famous mountain resorts." Special accommodations for truck drivers included recreation lounges and dormitory lodging. The main building on the south side of the turnpike was accessible from the westbound lanes via a tunnel under the turnpike from the service station on the north side. Howard Johnson's was the original contractor for food service. Standard Oil Company of Pennsylvania ran the service stations. The colonial revival architectural design of the plaza buildings was often associated with roadside facilities, perhaps to counter the novelty and modernity of the superhighway and high-speed automobile travel. Turnpike promotional materials attributed the design inspiration to early Pennsylvania houses.

The Pennsylvania Turnpike set the precedent for subsequent cross-state tollroads and for the U.S. interstate highway system. During its first year of operation, 2.4 million vehicles crossed the turnpike, almost two times planners' estimates. Plans for extensions of the highway were soon approved, but World War II delayed construction. The eastern extension to Philadelphia was opened in November 1950, and the western extension to Ohio was opened in December 1951. The turnpike reached across the Delaware River to New Jersey in May 1956. The Northeast Extension to Scranton opened in November 1957.

Sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s the service station building on the north side of Midway Plaza was replaced with a larger one-story stone building to house a restaurant, and the underground walkway to the south, main plaza was closed to the public. By the mid 1980s Howard Johnson's monopoly on food service across the turnpike was broken, and the interiors of the main plaza buildings were redesigned for a variety of fast food restaurants. The exteriors of the buildings have generally been maintained according to their original appearance.

Sources:

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